Dail na Caraidh Early Bronze Age Metalwork Hoard

In the 1980s complete and fragmentary axeheads and daggers were discovered at Dail na Caraidh, north of Fort William, near the confluence of the rivers Lundy and Lochy, near a prominent mound. Some of the finds were discovered by metal detectors, some by subsequent excavation. Altogether there were 21 pieces of flat axes, with 11 complete or nearly complete, providing a minimum total of 13 axes, most of the Migdale type where it is possible to determine shape. Five of the objects had tin-enhanced surfaces. In addition, nine fragments of flat daggers were also found. These were tentatively assigned to the Milston type, of which only three others were known in 1999 in Scotland (Barrett and Gourley 1999, 182).

The excavations also uncovered some lithic material, most undiagnostic, with 63% quartz, 36% flint, and one piece of agate. It is interpreted as a working site, perhaps sited to take advantage of fishing and small game (Clarke 1999).

The excavators felt that the site for the metalwork was carefully chosen, on a small terrace which had made into a distinctive promontory by the rivers, and next to the mound. A pollen core was taken to the west of the mound, with seven radiocarbon dates, showing changing vegetation in the area from Mesolithic period. These provided evidence of an Early Bronze Age landscape of heather moorland, with mainly birch and some oak, alder and hazel (Barrett et al 1999). A small piece of worked birchwood, found in the base of the peat, gave an Iron Age date, providing evidence of peat encroachment and later use at the site (Dickson and Dickson 1999).

The metalwork fell into three clusters. Although there is some ambiguity in where some were recovered, or identification from the fragments, it is clear that this is the largest group of Early Bronze Age flat axeheads recovered in Scotland. The axehead typology suggested at least two separate deposits, the first axes only, the second axes and daggers (O’Connor 1999).

Altogether the site appears to be one for ritual deposition, used over an unknown period of time. The location, on the Great Glen, may be significant, as part of an east-west transport route. The location, next to a prominent landmark, is consistent with other finds in the Highlands, such as the axeheads deposited near a boulder at Knockgranish near Aviemore (Cowie 2004, 254, 258).

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